

# Photospot: The endemic Ethiopian race of the African Goshawk

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Under the Biological Species Concept, eight species of *Accipiter* breed in sub-Saharan Africa. The point of view that all African Goshawk *A. tachiro* populations belong to one biological species may be compared to that for Shikra *A. badius*, the only other strongly polytypic African *Accipiter*. The latter's two African populations differ slightly from each other in migratory and transitional moult strategies, but markedly from some of the Asian races<sup>3</sup>. Populations of the widespread African Goshawk are even more geographically distinct in size and plumage characteristics (intensity of coloration and pattern) than those of Shikra<sup>6</sup>. This variation is, in part, individual but mostly related to age and sexual dimorphism. *Birds of Africa*<sup>1</sup> grouped all populations into one species, whereas *Handbook of the Birds of the World*<sup>4</sup> recognised two, although Kemp, in a subsequent work, also treated them as a single species<sup>5</sup>. Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire<sup>2</sup> stated that the southern and eastern *tachiro* group 'can be every bit as much a forest bird' as the equatorial *toussenelii* group. These authors also remarked that both do have a similar, peculiar display flight (*contra Birds of Africa*<sup>1</sup> and Kemp<sup>4</sup>).

Louette<sup>8,9</sup> observed that morphological characteristics of this bird vary according to habitat (and apparently also according to the presence of the similar Chestnut-flanked Sparrowhawk *A. castanilius*!). In evergreen forest habitat, African Goshawks are rather small, with colourful adults in both sexes, the females being quite 'masculine' in this respect. Louette<sup>8</sup> concluded, from a detailed study of specimens, that size and plumage morphology follow a west–east cline in West Africa (the presence of the smallest birds in the West being the reason for unsubstantiated claims that Chestnut-flanked Sparrowhawk occurs there). In the larger eastern and southern African woodland races, the female is more cryptically coloured.

African Goshawk is the only *Accipiter* with endemic circum-African island (Pemba, Bioko) and Ethiopian montane races. These three subspecies, like the evergreen forest-belt birds,

show enforcement of colourful advertising plumage and loss of sexual plumage dimorphism, and are also rather small (this is especially true for the island birds, the Ethiopian race takes a more intermediate position). A habitat-related trade-off in morphological characteristics comes to mind as an explanation (possibly also, in part, character displacement). This may be the result of adaptation to a relatively closed environment in which the needs for sexual attraction overrule the benefit of crypsis in the female<sup>7</sup>.

The monotypic Chestnut-flanked Sparrowhawk, on the other hand, is only present in the Lower Guinea forest region. It has been claimed to occur in Upper Guinea and in Ethiopia, but without proof. The photograph included here, which was taken on 29 April 2003, at Wondo Genet, Ethiopia, by Paul Ellis, clearly shows the following characteristics, all typical of the adult of the endemic race of African Goshawk *A. t. unduliventer* in comparison with adult Chestnut-flanked Sparrowhawk:

- Smallish head (noticeably broader in *castanilius*)
- No bare yellow skin in front of the eye
- Throat grey, not white
- Barring on breast rufous-brown, not dark grey (note that the barring in *castanilius* is erroneously described as 'chestnut' in *Birds of Africa*<sup>1</sup>)
- Flanks rufous, not dark red
- Back grey, not blackish
- Feet plain orange, not overlaid with blackish green (colour in museum skins).

The tail pattern fits both species. The Ethiopian race of African Goshawk, *A. t. unduliventer* (of which *A. t. croizati*, described from a few specimens, also from Ethiopia, is probably a synonym, though *Birds of Africa*<sup>1</sup> and *Handbook of the Birds of the World*<sup>4</sup> mention it as a different race) is rarely mentioned in the literature and no photographs of the bird in life were previously known to me. The bird depicted here is probably a male, the female being slightly less colourful and more bulky. ♀

## References

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African Goshawk *Accipiter tachiro unduliventer*, Wondo Genet, Ethiopia, 29 April 2003 (Paul Ellis)